This revised second edition offers an integrated overview of the history of Europe, East and West, now extended to cover the period from the end of World War II to the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

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T.B.
Oxford
July 2011
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for the First Edition

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Oxford
May 2005
In January 1995 the French President François Mitterrand, close to the end of his second term of office and, indeed, of his own remarkable life, made an emotional valedictory address to the European Parliament. He reminded the assembled MEPs of how World War II had brought “grief, the pain of separation, the presence of death – all as a result of the mutual enmity of the peoples of Europe.” He went on to lay the blame for such suffering squarely on the nationalistic sentiments endemic in Europe at a time when “everyone saw the world from his or her own viewpoint, and … those viewpoints were generally distorting.” Mitterrand praised those who, after the war, had been able to envisage a “more radiant future … based on peace and reconciliation.” Yet he concluded by appealing to Europeans to continue the struggle to overcome their past, and warned that “nationalism means war!”¹ A few years earlier his peroration might have seemed fanciful; yet now western Europe was witnessing, as a rather forlorn observer, precisely such a devastating war of rival nationalisms in the former Yugoslavia (1991–5). In the mid-1990s imagery of “ethnic cleansing” in Bosnia, and even of starving prisoners in camps, uncomfortably connected Europe’s present with the problems of its recent past.

Mitterrand spoke for a generation that had either participated in the war or whose lives had been directly affected by it (a group that included most leading European statesmen and women well into the 1980s). By their standards, the history of Europe since 1945 could well be viewed as a triumph, not so much in terms of the remarkable growth and diffusion of prosperity, but simply in terms of the avoidance of the war, dictatorship and mass killing which had plagued the continent between 1914 and 1945. But peace is, of course, more than simply the avoidance of war, and the long peace of the decades after 1945 rested on the deliberate creation of new institutional arrangements that made war between west European states unimaginable. In the course of the 1990s these arrangements began to be extended to include central Europe as well. This does not mean that
Europe was free from conflict after 1945. As we shall see, in addition to the unprecedented division of the continent imposed by the Cold War (c. 1947–91) and the often brutal imposition of Soviet authority on its satellite states, the peace of Europe was regularly disturbed by political violence, by vibrant new political and social movements, and – in the case of both southern and eastern Europe – the pains of transition from dictatorship to democracy. Even so, by the end of the century Europe seemed smaller, tamer and more homogeneous than it had been prior to 1945, and a central theme of this book will be how this less dangerous (and in most ways better) Europe was created.

Because the war – and the lessons learnt from it – did so much to determine the evolution of Europe after 1945, Chapter 1 will examine the conflict and its legacy in some detail. This introduction, however, looks at the broader context, and asks what went so badly awry in Europe during the first half of the twentieth century, especially in the two decades after the end of World War I (1914–18). Six themes will be explored below: politics, international relations, the economy, social divisions, culture, and European imperialism. In each case the question to bear in mind is how the severe and chronic problems that were evident prior to 1945 could be overcome in the postwar era.

The hallmark of inter-war politics was the unprecedented richness of ideological variety and the absence of the kind of consensus that came to characterize politics in western Europe after 1945. In Spain during the 1930s, for instance, the whole political spectrum could be observed, from revolutionary anarchism and communism on the left, via an embattled liberalism to various brands of conservative and Catholic authoritarianism on the right. Understandably, the inter-war years have been viewed above all in terms of the failure of democracy. Quite apart from the establishment of Mussolini’s fascist dictatorship in the early 1920s and Hitler’s overthrow of the Weimar Republic in 1933, different forms of dictatorship became the norm during these years throughout eastern and southern Europe. In the Soviet Union, meanwhile, under Stalin’s leadership the Communist Party embarked on an ambitious and ruthless program of industrialization and agricultural collectivization. By 1939 democratic government was limited to Britain, France, Switzerland, the smaller states of north-west Europe, and Scandinavia. Although a rather successful experiment in social democracy was underway in Sweden, on the whole the mood in the democracies was defensive and pessimistic. The future seemed to lie with the regimes of right and left that could mobilize their populations, either by terror or by appealing to class hatreds, nationalist or ethnic passions, and utopian visions.

Yet to concentrate on the anti-democratic forces of both ideological extremes ignores the degree to which democracy was itself part of the problem. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries European states had undergone incomplete processes of democratization in response to the emergence of more educated, literate, and urban “mass” societies. Even in Britain universal suffrage (for all men and women aged 21 or over) was not achieved until 1928, while French
INTRODUCTION: EUROPE’S TROUBLES

women did not receive the vote until 1944. Democracy had come, in the words of British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, “at a gallop,” and too rapidly for many European countries after 1918. Consequently, democracy came to mean many different things in the inter-war years, often negative. For some it represented an ungovernable cacophony of small interest groups; for others a means by which elites divided the corrupt spoils of office; while in Spain the coming of the reforming Second Republic in 1931 posed a deadly threat to the interests of the rich and powerful. It was, moreover, far from clear who the real democrats were. Many on the left, for instance, rallied to defend “bourgeois” democracy at the eleventh hour in the mid-1930s, but this was more a response to the threat of fascism than any genuine reconciliation. Such an instrumental approach to democracy was again evident in eastern Europe in 1945–8. In the West, a crucial task for politicians after 1945 would therefore be to identify democratic politics with prosperity and social harmony rather than with crisis and weakness.

In the sphere of international relations, the most spectacular failing was, of course, the inability to prevent the outbreak of a new European war in September 1939. The principal aggressors during the 1930s were undoubtedly Hitler and Mussolini, but their aggression emphasized the underlying failure to establish a new order for European security after 1918, whether based on the newly formed League of Nations or – more narrowly – on the strength of Britain and France. Much of the blame must attach to the Treaty of Versailles (1919), which humiliated Germany (through territorial losses and the imposition of reparations payments) without destroying the basis of its military and economic power. Moreover, the formation of a host of weak new states in central and eastern Europe out of the former Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires became a source of weakness as soon as Germany and the Soviet Union regained their strength. Even so, success had seemed tantalizingly close in the late 1920s, when the signing of the 1925 Locarno Treaty (which guaranteed the borders of western Europe) was followed by the temporary stabilization of Germany’s Weimar Republic and the rescheduling of German reparations. Locarno fostered a belief that not only could Franco-German antagonism, the storm center of European instability since 1870, be overcome, but even that the time was ripe to take a significant step towards a “European Federal Union.”

Such optimism was destroyed in the early 1930s by the Depression, by the revival of nationalism, and above all by the advent of Hitler’s Nazi regime bent on revising the Treaty of Versailles. By the mid-1930s the League had collapsed as an effective forum for resolving international disputes, and Britain and France were pursuing their national and imperial self-interest, rather than collective security, through the “appeasement” of Germany and Italy. At Munich in September 1938 war was averted, but only by presenting Hitler with the German-populated borderlands of Czechoslovakia. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union also pursued its own interests, opposing fascism in Spain during the Civil War (1936–9), but forging a nonaggression pact with Hitler in August 1939 when it became clear
that the Western democracies would not form an alliance to contain him. Accordingly, when Britain and France did go to war on September 3, 1939 in response to Hitler’s invasion of Poland, they lacked any worthwhile allies. The United States, which was still recovering from the Depression and was prone to powerful isolationist sentiments, leaned towards the democracies but remained officially neutral.

The problems of Europe owed much to a world economy which, dislocated by World War I, almost ground to a halt following the crash of 1929. The impact of the Great Depression was most visible in the more developed industrial nations: in the early 1930s unemployment peaked at 6 million in Germany, 3 million in Britain, and 13 million in the United States. International trade was hit hard, and by 1938 only the Scandinavian economies had restored their 1929 levels of exports. For most European countries 1929 was an economic benchmark not to be reached again until the late 1940s (and then rapidly surpassed). Although the crisis is often visualized in terms of idle factories, coal mines, and shipbuilding yards, across the continent farmers were confronted with a collapse in agricultural prices. Even in France and Germany, let alone eastern Europe, agriculture was still woefully unmechanized and many farmers were forced to abandon the market and await better times (which came during and after the war). Indeed, the one benefit of the Depression for the industrial world was the steady decline of international commodity prices which, paradoxically, made the 1930s a period of some affluence for those in work. Where manufacturing prospered it tended to be in the production of goods designed for an expanding domestic market, such as automobiles and household appliances. In 1938, for instance, there were already 1.2 million privately owned cars in Germany, and 2 million in Britain.

The political impact of the Great Depression was profound. High unemployment undermined confidence in the democracies – fatally in the case of Germany – and encouraged those most affected to turn to leaders offering extreme solutions. The German people rallied to Hitler’s drive for full employment, even though the economy was increasingly geared not simply to recovery but to making war. In France the leftist Popular Front swept to power in the elections of May 1936 offering a new deal for the workers after a number of years of harsh deflation. However, its policies, which included a 40-hour week and the first paid holidays, soon encountered determined opposition from employers. Meanwhile, the apparent immunity of the Soviet Union from the Depression enhanced the attractiveness of communism throughout Europe. Economists were shocked by the scale of the crisis, but no new consensus emerged as to how to solve it. The ideas of the Cambridge economist John Maynard Keynes, whose work proved so internationally influential after 1945, were by no means generally accepted before the war. In the absence of any common international program for recovery, democratic governments turned to a range of short-term pragmatic measures, such as protectionism, imperial preference, currency devaluation, and cartelization. For their part, the
fascist regimes resorted to autarky (self-sufficiency), barter agreements for raw materials, and, ultimately, the forcible seizure of resources by conquest.

The brief, carnivalesque experience of the French Popular Front, when workers occupied their factories and coal mines to reinforce the verdict of the ballot box, was a reminder of how Europe’s social divisions could still erupt into class conflict. In Spain, an even more destructive blend of social, political, and religious violence marked the early months of the Civil War in 1936. European societies remained intensely class conscious: educational opportunities were still largely determined by wealth, social services were patchy and often rudimentary, and working-class budgets were still dominated by the costs of basic housing and nutrition. Inequalities were even greater in parts of rural Europe. Across southern Spain, Portugal, and Italy, for instance, landless laborers experienced extreme poverty and insecurity. In general, the Depression had served to reinforce the established social order, whether under a democracy such as Britain or an allegedly egalitarian dictatorship such as Nazi Germany. At the same time, however, powerful social solidarities survived the economic and political traumas of the inter-war years, such as the working-class culture of factory and community. Religion, too, played an increasingly important role in defining social and political identities. The Catholic Church, still deeply suspicious of democracy, proved remarkably adept at maintaining its autonomy under both democracies and dictatorships. Across Europe lay “Catholic Action” organizations such as the JOC (Young Christian Workers) flourished during the 1930s.

In many countries questions of race and ethnicity gained a remarkable and destructive new salience in the inter-war years. Violent anti-Semitism, of course, became central to the politics of the Nazis, if not to their political appeal. Once established in power, they proceeded to establish a “racial state,” using both legal means and thuggery to separate out the German population from Jews and other minorities. However, it must be recalled that, while Nazi anti-Semitism was unparalleled in its extremism, awareness of ethnic difference had been heightened across the new states of central and eastern Europe after 1918. For instance, restrictions on numbers of Jews who could attend the universities and join professions were widespread by the 1930s. Moreover, many of these new states were undermined by ethnic differences, such as the resentment felt by Croats against a Serb-dominated Yugoslavia or by Slovaks against the Czech domination of Czechoslovakia. The question of Transylvania, where a large Hungarian population was placed under Romanian rule in 1919, remained highly contentious into the communist – and indeed into the post-communist – era.

Developments in both the high arts and in popular “mass” culture contributed to the instability in the inter-war years. The fractured, subversive impact of modernism in literature and the arts before 1914 was greatly amplified by World War I, which led many to question prewar assumptions about patriotism, religious belief, and technological progress. Indeed, the war, and the Russian Revolution of 1917 which it brought about, were not simply military and political convulsions,
but immense cultural shocks in their own right. The culture of the 1920s reflected a world in which traditional values and hierarchies had been found wanting, but in which no new certainties had been established. The consequences were most striking in the artistic ferment of Germany’s Weimar Republic, where culture rapidly became the focus of bitter conflict. Here, broadly modernist and democratic forms of expression, (such as the theater of Bertolt Brecht and Bauhaus design and architecture) clashed head-on with conservatives committed to preserving the cultural purity of the German Volk from “degenerate” influences.

It was inevitable that, due to the advent of new technologies and new forms of cultural activity, culture would be fiercely contested during the inter-war years. This applied most obviously to the advent of radio and the cinema, but also to advances in photography and propaganda. No authority – political or spiritual – could afford to ignore the opportunities offered by radio to communicate with the public in their homes, or the potential of cinema to shape dreams and desires. European dictatorships were fully alive to the importance of culture as a means of creating new concepts of community, whether racial or ideological. As the German critic Walter Benjamin observed in 1936, Nazism had achieved the “introduction of aesthetics into political life.” The Nazis’ stage-managed rallies were used to show a nation on the march: ironically, their mastery of modern techniques of lighting and cinematography enabled them to create a mythologized past. Mussolini’s regime was infatuated with the cinema, and built the Cinecittà film production complex in 1937. In the Soviet Union the initial modernism and abstraction of the immediate post-revolutionary era gave way in the 1930s to a “Socialist Realist” style that forced artists to celebrate the achievements of the Communist Party and its leaders. These contrasting “totalitarian” styles were, famously, juxtaposed in the rival pavilions at the Paris Exposition of 1937.

Finally, it is important to note that, despite the immense destruction caused by World War I, Europe was still a preeminent force in the world. The British and French empires, in particular, were larger than ever after 1918, swollen with “mandates” (former territories of the defeated German and Ottoman Turkish empires) awarded by the League of Nations. Portugal, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, and Spain also retained significant colonial possessions. Empires remained highly attractive, as a mark of prestige and national pride, as an economic asset (providing raw materials and markets) during the Depression, and as a source of military recruits. Both Spain and Italy were engaged in bitter campaigns to expand their empires (Spain in Morocco in the 1920s; Italy in Abyssinia in 1935–6). However, empire also carried a cost. Britain and France, in particular, had to “think imperially” when considering grand strategy, and to be aware of the challenge from new imperial powers – such as Japan and the United States – in the Pacific. Colonial powers also had to combat the rise of nationalism (especially in India) and to prove that imperial rule brought genuine benefits to the colonized. In many respects, therefore, the European empires were living on borrowed time in the inter-war years. Although they survived World War II, it rapidly became apparent
(to some countries more swiftly than others) that formal empire was no longer sustainable, and by the 1960s all of the leading European states had refocused their attention on Europe.

Europe on the verge of World War II provided, therefore, a diverse and bewildering spectacle. The fault lines of conflict ran not only between the nations of Europe, but also within them. If, to take Mitterrand’s argument, the world was seen from a plurality of viewpoints, then these perspectives might just as well be ideological, national, or religious. What would the future hold? In the West there were the first glimmerings of how this dysfunctional Europe could be made to work. For instance, new economic thinking already envisaged a more constructive role for the state, and a balance between the needs of the free market and the provision of welfare. Moreover, the seeds of the idea had been sown that states would have to sacrifice some of their sovereignty in order to protect their vital interests. Yet the dictators, fascist and communist, were articulating their own very different prescriptions, and by the late 1930s they seemed to be in the ascendancy. All would hang on the unpredictable outcome of war.
The War and its Legacy

Conquest and Occupation

Between 1939 and 1942 most of Europe was united under German domination. At its greatest extent the territory occupied by Germany and its allies stretched from the Caucasus to the Atlantic coast of France, and from Greece to Norway (see Map 1.1). In addition to Britain and the USSR, only a small number of neutral states retained some degree of independence. Having rapidly overrun Poland and western Europe in 1939–40, Hitler took his greatest gamble by invading the Soviet Union in June 1941 (“Operation Barbarossa”) while leaving an undefeated Britain in the rear. Although the Soviet resistance stiffened as German troops approached Moscow, vast tracts of territory and more than 3 million Red Army soldiers were lost in the first six months of combat on the Eastern Front. By September 1942, after a further successful campaigning summer, German forces stood on the Volga at Stalingrad, some 2,000 kilometers from Berlin.

What was the nature of this new German empire? According to Nazi rhetoric this was a “New Order,” a hierarchy within which non-Germans would have their designated part to play. The “Germanic” peoples, such as the Dutch and Norwegians, might eventually be absorbed into the Reich, whereas the fate of the Slavs of eastern Europe would be resettlement and enslavement. Yet while there were those in the more privileged groups eager to collaborate on such terms (see below), Hitler had no intention of sharing power with them. The New Order enshrined Germany’s domination of Europe, and its true nature was one of economic exploitation, political oppression, and increasingly severe racial persecution. The German war economy required immense amounts of labor, food, raw materials, and bullion which, apart from that which could be supplied by the neutral states, had to come from the conquered territories. The trade of
Map 1.1  The Nazi empire, autumn 1942.

occupied Europe was reoriented towards Germany with some, often unforeseen, success. For instance, contrary to Nazi ambitions for the economic exploitation of the east, France provided as much food as, and more industrial material than, all of the occupied Soviet territory.\(^1\) Indeed, Germany took 30–40 percent of the wartime national product of France, the Netherlands, and Norway. The Nazis also made up their labor shortages with foreign workers, initially volunteers from allied and satellite states and latterly those drafted from occupied territory, as well as prisoners of war and concentration camp inmates. By 1945 forced and foreign labor constituted 25 percent of industrial employment in Germany and 20 percent of the civilian labor force.\(^2\)

The nature of Nazi occupation varied greatly. This was no uniform, monolithic empire, but rather one that reflected the inconsistencies and varied power structures of Nazi Germany. Some territory (such as western Poland, Alsace-Lorraine, and Slovenia) was incorporated directly into Germany. The Czech lands (Bohemia and Moravia) had already been absorbed into the Reich, in March 1939, but as a quasi-autonomous “Protectorate.” Elsewhere, there was an immense diversity of forms of government. The Nazis occasionally entrusted power to indigenous fascists, such as Vidkun Quisling in Norway, but they soon became a focus for popular hatred and resistance. The leading Belgian fascist Léon Degrelle was, by contrast, kept at arm’s length by the German military authorities and eventually volunteered to fight on the Eastern Front. In occupied Denmark the prewar government was allowed to remain in office until 1943, while in the Netherlands a German civilian authority supervised the work of the local administration (although this was increasingly staffed by members of Anton Mussert’s Dutch Nazi Party). France was divided into a zone of military occupation in the north and west (with some 67 percent of the population, 66 percent of cultivated land, and 75 percent of mining and industry) and a “free” zone under the collaborationist regime of Marshal Pétain, based in the spa town of Vichy. The whole of France was eventually occupied in November 1942 as fears grew of an Allied invasion. In eastern Europe, meanwhile, different agencies vied for control, and grandiose titles did not always carry great power. Alfred Rosenberg, minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories, and Hans Frank, Governor General of occupied Poland, saw their own authority dwindle as the war progressed, while that of Heinrich Himmler and the SS – charged with carrying through the extermination of the Jews – increased.

These conquests, which brought large Jewish populations under German rule, both encouraged and facilitated a murderous radicalization in Nazi racial policy. Although Hitler had prophesied in his Reichstag speech of January 30, 1939 that a new world war would result in the “destruction of the Jewish race in Europe,,”\(^3\) the thrust of Nazi policy in the late 1930s had been to encourage Jewish emigration. This changed with the invasion of Poland and, more significantly, with Operation Barbarossa, when SS special commandos (*Einsatzgruppen*) were detailed to murder Nazism’s supposed ideological and racial enemies.
behind the front line. These units shot as many as 2 million men, women, and children in cold blood, often with the willing help of local populations. At the same time, senior Nazis began to speak of a “complete solution of the Jewish question within the German sphere of influence in Europe.” Further emigration was blocked and steps taken to organize the deportation of the Jews to occupied Poland. This policy was systematized at the Wannsee Conference of January 20, 1942, under the chairmanship of Reinhard Heydrich, where the organizational arrangements were made for Europe to be “combed through from west to east.” The purpose of this deportation was mass industrialized murder, initially pioneered at a number of smaller camps in Poland where Jews were killed by mobile gas vans. Most western Jews were sent to Auschwitz, a sprawling industrial and extermination complex where those deemed unfit to work (80-90 percent) were murdered in gas chambers on arrival. Those Jews selected to work for IG-Farben’s synthetic rubber plant could only expect to live for three to four months – only one month if set to work in the associated coal mine.

The “final solution” reflected the sense of power and boundless ambition felt by Nazi officials at the height of their supremacy within Europe. By late 1941 the Soviet Union seemed close to collapse and Britain was engaged in its own struggle for survival against the German U-boats in the Atlantic. Even the entry of the United States into the war following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor (December 7, 1941) made little initial difference as it would take almost a year for US servicemen to be deployed in action, and even then in North Africa rather than Europe. Moreover, war with Japan further stretched British resources and some 70,000 British and imperial troops capitulated at Singapore in February 1942. There were, however, also causes for concern on the German side, notably the very limited support that Germany received from its allies, and even from its Axis partner Italy. For all Mussolini’s martial bluster, it soon became clear that Italy was ill prepared, both militarily and economically, for modern warfare. The Italian army suffered humiliating setbacks at the hands of the Greeks (October 1940) and the British in North Africa, while newly colonized Abyssinia was liberated in 1941. Half of Italy’s modern and expensive battleship fleet was severely damaged at anchor in Taranto by British torpedo bombers. The war economy was inefficient, slow to expand, and crippled by a lack of energy resources which forced Italy into dependence on Germany. By 1942 Italy had sent 290,000 workers to Germany in exchange for supplies of coal and steel. Hitler’s other allies, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria, were largely agrarian states. Their prewar authoritarian governments were already locked into economic dependence on Germany, and mainly concerned with rectifying their own territorial grievances. Alongside Finland, which joined the war on Germany’s side to take revenge for the Soviet aggression directed against it in the winter of 1939/40, these allies were, at best, able to play an auxiliary military role on the Eastern Front.
Collaboration

Many in occupied Europe chose to collaborate with Nazi Germany, for a range of personal, ideological, and ethnic reasons. Collaboration was a far more complex phenomenon than its best-known image – of shaven-headed women humiliated after the liberation of France for sleeping with German soldiers – would suggest. In fact, collaboration represented a gradient down which all occupied populations might travel to some degree, and which might well go no further than the quite proper relations of local authorities with an occupying power. In cases of economic relations it was often difficult to tell where “business as usual” and an eye for profit elided into unacceptable levels of support for the German war effort. In France, for instance, contracts placed by the German authorities were not easily refused and, in any case, provided otherwise unobtainable employment for as many as 3 million workers. Yet their labor produced aircraft, shells, and uniforms, while French construction companies built the “Atlantic Wall” and a giant submarine base at Saint-Nazaire. At the individual level, too, there were many gray areas. For instance, François Mitterrand, the future French president, slipped easily between working for the collaborationist Vichy regime and the resistance. In such cases, many would argue subsequently that they collaborated out of a sense of duty to protect their countrymen from the worst of the occupation. Some governments or heads of state opted to remain in post rather than seek exile, while Pétain famously described himself as the “shield” of France. Many lower-ranking officials and members of the police also continued in office, and some would undoubtedly have shared the Nazis’ anti-communism and anti-Semitism. In all these cases, of course, the supreme test came when Nazi demands, notably for the deportation of the Jews, placed their own compatriots in danger.

Collaboration requires a context, as the occupiers must be willing to work with the occupied. This was far less likely to be the case in eastern Europe where the prime Nazi objective was to create Lebensraum (“living space”) for the expansion of the German race and to crush the indigenous Slavic population. In Poland, for instance, where Nazi (and, indeed, Soviet) policy was to destroy the prewar elites, collaboration was barely an option. Conversely, the Czechs, who were deemed to be semi-Germanic, enjoyed a relatively privileged status in their “Protectorate,” retaining their own president and civil service. Here, collaboration was both possible and actively pursued, encouraged by the iron hand of Protector Heydrich in 1941–2. One major failing of Nazi rule was in the occupied Soviet territories, where resentment at Stalin’s policies in the 1930s plus local anti-Semitism had created a reservoir of potential support. This was particularly strong in the Baltic states and eastern Poland, which had only been seized by the USSR in 1939–40. The Nazis encouraged the Balts, Belorussians, and Ukrainians to play an active role in the extermination of the Jews, and thousands of Ukrainian and Russian “Hiwi” auxiliaries served in the Wehrmacht. However, Nazi policy towards the region was
blinkered by notions of racial superiority, and many opportunities were missed. Andrei Vlasov, a Red Army general captured in 1942 who turned against Stalin, was not allowed to form his “Committee for the Liberation of the Peoples of Russia” until September 1944, too late to influence events on the Eastern Front. Tellingly, German occupation policy was far more successful in the Caucasus, where the Wehrmacht was in charge and where local religious and cultural identities were respected.

Amongst those who wholeheartedly chose political collaboration, small minorities identified fully with Nazism and sought to integrate into the “New Order.” For instance, some 50,000 Dutch, 40,000 Belgian, and 20,000 French volunteers served with the Waffen SS on the Eastern Front, alongside smaller numbers of Scandinavians. Such ideologically motivated collaborators tended to be prewar fascists who saw the Nazis as leading an international crusade against communism (and were greatly relieved when the Nazi–Soviet Pact was shattered by the German assault on the Soviet Union). There was, however, no automatic correlation between prewar and wartime political positions. Many conservative nationalists (such as Charles de Gaulle, who was often denounced as a “fascist” during his career) were above all patriots who detested the German occupation. Likewise, not all collaborators came from the right. A number were former socialists, such as Henri De Man in Belgium and Marcel Déat in France, who felt that the events of 1940 proved the failure of capitalism and parliamentary democracy. For them, to collaborate was to side—not necessarily in an opportunistic manner—with the new and enduring reality in Europe.

Other collaborators might not share Nazi goals or ideals but still saw the German victory as a chance to promote their own agenda for radical political change. For instance, Pétain had initially appeared as a reassuring figure amidst the chaos of July 1940. He enjoyed public support in negotiating an armistice and abolishing the Third French Republic (which was overwhelmingly approved in parliament by 569 votes to 80). However, Pétain’s attempt to create a more traditionalist, Catholic, and xenophobic France under the trinity of “work, family, fatherland” alienated many who might have supported a more politically neutral regime. Instead, Vichy’s assault on republican values and its ultra-conservative policies served to galvanize resistance. This was compounded from 1942 by the failure to protect the French people from the Nazi labor draft and the rounding up of the Jews (in which the French police played a crucial role). By this stage Pétain had lost control of his two principal assets which had given him some leverage with Berlin: control over the French fleet and the colonial empire. In 1942–4 Vichy’s collaboration became increasingly overt under the premiership of Pierre Laval, and its paramilitary police force, the Milice, was effectively engaged in a civil war with the resistance.

Collaboration also offered opportunities to ethnic groups who welcomed German aggression as an opportunity to break up existing states and to assert their own cultural and political independence. Before the outbreak of war Germany had encouraged Slovak separatists to secede from the rump Czecho-Slovakia in
March 1939, and Slovakia became a German satellite state under the Catholic priest Joseph Tiso. Other examples included the fascist Ustasha in Croatia, some Flemish nationalists in Belgium, Breton autonomists in France, and Irish Republicans. Such groups might act as useful auxiliaries to Nazi rule, and as a means further to divide and rule the conquered, but if given too much authority their role could well prove counterproductive. For instance, once in power the Ustasha embarked on a murderous pogrom of Serbs, Jews, and Gypsies. Their intention was to create an ethnically homogenous greater Croatia, but their brutality generated considerable support for Tito’s Partisans.

The legacy of collaboration was extremely influential in postwar Europe, and nothing, apart from the defeat of Nazi Germany itself, did more to discredit interwar fascist ideology. The punishment of collaborators (see below) eliminated a whole tier of politicians and ideologues either through execution, imprisonment, removal of political rights, or simple popular disapproval. The attraction of fascism had hardly been destroyed, but it had been driven to disguise itself for decades to come. The specter of the “ quisling” also hung over the Soviet domination of postwar eastern Europe and guaranteed a certain degree of autonomy for Soviet allies in the satellite states. Moreover, collaboration – alongside the resistance – sponsored a postwar political realignment as many who had formerly identified with the authoritarian right, such as Catholics, now came to see that their values could be enshrined in the democratic politics emerging from the war. In the process, a veil was drawn over the realities and complexities of collaboration that was not lifted until the subject was critically reexamined by historians and film-makers in the early 1970s.8 It should also be remembered that, while the memory of collaboration remained generally negative, in parts of central and eastern Europe a more positive connotation survived. For instance, with the fall of communism in 1989/90 the Ustasha and Tiso regimes were often seen in Croatia and Slovakia as a brave first essay at independence.

Resistance

On August 25, 1944, General de Gaulle, leader of the Free French, arrived in Paris and proclaimed that it was a city “liberated by herself, by her own people, with the help of the armies of France.”9 Despite such rhetoric, no occupied country was in fact in a position to liberate itself during the war. Even though large resistance armies developed in some countries, notably Yugoslavia, Poland, Greece, and Albania, their success was ultimately dependent on the ability of the Allied armies to drive out the Germans. The case was made, tragically, in Poland where the advancing Soviet forces encouraged the Polish resistance to launch the Warsaw uprising (August 1944) and then held back while it was brutally crushed by the Germans. By October, some 15,000 Polish fighters and 200,000 civilians had died.